Little leadership from top polluter; Former New York mayor calls out Trump during brief summit appearance

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Body

China on Monday made no new promises to take stronger climate action. The United States, having vowed to pull out of the Paris Agreement, said nothing at all, demonstrating a lack of leadership from the biggest polluter in history. A host of presidents and prime ministers used the occasion to boast about what they were doing to reduce emissions but made only incremental vows.

That was the scene at the UN Climate Action Summit, which Secretary General Antonio Guterres had organized to highlight what he called "concrete" commitments to wean the global economy away from planet-warming fossil fuels and do more to help the most vulnerable cope with the effects of global warming.

There were, in fact, some concrete commitments. Some 60 countries promised to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050, and several asset fund managers said they would aim to get to a net-zero portfolio of investments by the same year.

U.S. President Donald Trump unexpectedly dropped into the General Assembly hall with Vice-President Mike Pence in the late morning. Michael Bloomberg, the former New York City mayor, welcomed Trump's presence and addressed the president directly by saying, "Hopefully our discussions here will be useful for you when you formulate climate policy."

That was followed by laughter and applause. It signalled a sharp contrast from just a few years ago, when the United States had been credited with pushing other countries, including China, to take climate change seriously. The U.S. is not on track to meet its pledges under the Paris climate agreement and the Trump administration has rolled back a host of environmental regulations, from automobile tailpipes, coal plants and oil and gas wells.

The Trump administration did not request a speaking slot at the summit.

But what really got the attention of delegates in the hall was when Swedish teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg, early in the day, lit into world leaders for their "business as usual" approach to a problem so grave.

A bit later in the day, Thunberg watched with a look of fury in her eyes, as Trump passed through a hall, a video clip posted on Twitter showed.

As for China, it did not signal its readiness to issue stronger, swifter targets to transition away from fossil fuels, as many had hoped. Wang Yi, a special representative for President Xi Jinping, noted that his country was keeping the promises it made under the 2015 Paris accord and that "certain countries" - a clear reference to the U.S., which has said it intends to withdraw - were not.

"China will faithfully fulfil its obligations," Wang said.

President Emmanuel Macron of France also had a message for the United States, telling the assembly: "I don't want to see new trade negotiations with countries who are running counter to the Paris Agreement."

The statement could create a new stumbling block to trade agreements between the U.S. and Europe, which are already plagued by differences over agriculture, the rules of the global trading system and Trump's potential tariffs on cars.

China's decision to not signal higher ambition reflects, in part, concerns about its own slowing economy against the backdrop of conflicts with the United States on trade. It also reflected Beijing's reluctance to take stronger climate action in the absence of similar moves from richer countries. The European Union has not signalled its intention to cut emissions faster either, and the U.S. is nowhere on track to meet its original commitments under the Paris accord.

"There's no particular reason why China should do anything new now because they're not getting any pressure from the United States and they're on track to achieve their commitments," said Kelly Sims Gallagher, professor of energy and environmental policy at Tufts University.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India said his country would increase its share of renewable energy by 2022, without making any promises to reduce its dependence on coal.

Russia said that it would ratify the Paris Agreement, but nothing more about how to cut emissions from its state-owned petroleum industry.

Microsoft founder Bill Gates announced Monday that his foundation, along with the World Bank and some European governments, would provide $790 million in financial help to 300 million of the world's small farmers adapt to climate change. The Gates foundation pledged $310 million of that.

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